

UNBEATEN RECORD SHATTERED AT HITCHIN

ROTHMANS Isthmian League leaders Wycombe Wanderers stumbled to their first defeat of the season on Tuesday night to bring an end to their five match unbeaten record. Wycombe are still on top place but now last year's champions Hendon have narrowed the lead to just one point.

Defeat had to come sooner or later but I suspect few visualised it at Hitchin Town. The home side had won only one of their first five matches with nine goals conceded already.

The turning point came with Town's second goal after 59 minutes. Without doubt it was about the luckiest goal Wycombe have conceded for a long time — but it stressed the need for a tall goalkeeper.

The diminutive Dave Wright is as brave as they come but his height was certainly exposed by the Hitchin decider. Full back Tony Martin's centre fell well short but from about 25 yards out, Keith Hammond stuck out a boot in an attempt to push the ball into the penalty area. This he did, but with an unexpected bonus.

NO CONTACT

The ball spun upwards, towards the net. Wright, a couple of yards off his goalline, leapt to push the ball one-handed over the top but couldn't make contact and the shot looped under the crossbar and into the net.

It was a telling blow and did much to unsettle the confidence of the defence which for the first 45 minutes had looked absolutely watertight. From then on they were harried into mistakes and distribution fell to a low ebb. Hitchin, with a bit more luck (although they had used up a fair share of it with the goal), could easily have scored twice more.

So just where did it go wrong for Wanderers? Perhaps the most telling factor was in midfield during the second half. Service to the frontrunners was fair in the first half but in the second, Searle and Horseman had to fight for everything, the passes from midfield bringing them under pressure straight away.

They never really controlled events in the middle and few clear cut chances were created. Although he spent much of his time in midfield, Larry Pritchard's roving role upfront was unproductive.

Opposite again the defence looked

suspect under pressure after a sound first half. Every time a high ball went up in the second half there was a buzz of anticipation from the crowd — they knew full well it spelt trouble for Wycombe. Dave Bullock, now the number

First Derek Gamblin and then Rob Williams cleared off the line from Alan Jackett. Again the problem arose from a high ball with neither the keeper nor the defence able to clear cleanly from Pratt's free kick.

By STUART EARP; Hitchin T 2, Wycombe Wanderers 1

centre back, was hard pressed to deal with the many high crosses while Wright was loath to leave his line.

In the first half, things seemed to be going exactly to plan for the Blues. Tony Horseman, with a goal-a-game to his credit this term, had a good chance to put them ahead when Howard Kettleborough's suicidal pass back fell short, but "Bogey" gave the defence too much time to regroup.

The ever-dangerous Paul Giggle tried one shot from the edge of the box which Wright saved well and then in the 20th minute Hitchin could easily have scored after a scramble inside the visitors six yard box.

Three minutes later, however, Horseman's corner was cleared to Tony Brothers, who crossed to the far post. Mick Holifield, completely unmarked volleyed towards the roof of the net but veteran keeper Charlie Turner appeared to have the danger covered. He got his hands firmly behind the ball but then let it fall from his grasp and trickle over the line.

MORE TIME

For the remainder of the half, Wycombe used the ball well. They seemed to have much more time to execute attacks and with both full backs willing to overlap, made constant use of the flanks.

Hitchin, of course, raised their game no end after that. The fight that was missing in the first half, suddenly came to life with every ball disputed in midfield. Wycombe were put completely out of their stride.

Ten minutes later Hammond made it 2-1. The second goal

warning to Wycombe, who were slow to get into their stride. Then in the 49th minute Hitchin pulled back to level the scores.

Almost predictably the trouble came from a dead ball situation, this time a corner. Hughie Pratt floated a ball to the near post where Neil Bunker was allowed to nip and flick a header through the defence and into the net.

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Wanderers, trailing for the first time this season, began to make more errors as Hitchin pressed home their advantage. After 63 minutes another free kick had them in all sorts of trouble. Pratt lofted the ball into the area where Howard Kettleborough outjumped the

defence and thudded a header against the foot of the post.

Wycombe fought hard to get back into the game but were rushed into mistakes. Passes went astray and the cohesion of the first half disappeared. One or two chances were created, however.

In the 74th minute Derek Gamblin flighted over a free kick which was headed back into the area. Keith Searle rose high to power in a header but Turner blocked his close range effort.

British Universities striker Pete Watson came on for Howard Kettleborough with ten minutes remaining and with his first touch of the ball, almost put the match out of Wycombe's reach. A superb ball from Pratt left him yards clear of the defence. Wright came out and managed to deflect the ball off Watson's toes, forcing the striker out to a narrow angle. When the shot did come, Pritchard was on the line to deflect the ball clear.

Wanderers had one remaining chance to take a share of the points, five minutes from time. A poor kick from Hammond was picked up by Holifield who crossed to Horseman, unmarked in the six yard box. Wycombe's leading goalscorer aimed for the corner of the net but as Turner came out to challenge, Tony headed the ball a couple of inches past the post.

HITCHIN: D. Turner, A. Martin, K. Kettleborough, M. Howkins, H. Bevis, H. Pratt, A. Jackett, N. Bunker, H. Kettleborough, P. Watson (0 mins), K. Hammond, P. Giggle.
WYCOMBE: D. Wright, D. Gamblin, P. Wood, D. Bullock, R. Grant (sub. D. Evans 63 mins), R. Williams, A. Brothers, M. Holifield, A. Horseman, K. Searle, L. Pritchard.

Referee: K. G. Salmon (Cockfosters).
Half time: 1-1. **Goalscorers:** Wycombe: Holifield (1), Hitchin — Bunker (49), Hammond (69).
Attendance: 850 (approx).